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ABSTRACT

Assessment in early childhood special education should go beyond diagnosis of the child in isolation and include evaluation of the child using an ecological perspective. The ecological perspective assesses interactions of the child with significant people in the environment such as parents and teachers. Three aspects of ecological early childhood assessment include: family interviews, adult-child learning styles, and parent-child interactions. Family interviews identify family resources, needs, strengths, and concerns. Interview techniques include the use of semistructured questions and the sharing of family stories. Interviewing skills such as effective listening are critical to the success of the interview method. Evaluation of learning styles is also important, as children's learning and performance at a very young age are affected by whether they are visual, auditorial, or kinesthetic learners. Effective therapists and teachers vary their techniques in response to the learner's style. Parent-child interactions should also be assessed, with the objective of increasing positive interchanges. Parent participation in a training program can help them develop a clearer understanding of child development and how their interactions affect it and can improve the parent/child relationship, thereby building the child's self-esteem. (Contains 18 references.) (JDD)

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Three Aspects of Early Childhood Special Education Assessment: Family Interviews, Learning Styles, and Parent-Child Interactions

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Running Head: THREE ASPECTS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

Assessment in early childhood special education needs to go beyond diagnosis of the child in isolation and include evaluation of the child using an ecological perspective. The ecological perspective will assess interactions of the child with significant people in the environment such as parents and teachers. This article will focus on three aspects of ecological early childhood assessment: the family interview, the evaluation of adult-child learning styles, and parent-child interactions.

Three Aspects of Early Childhood Assessment: Family Interviews, Learning Styles, and Parent-Child Interactions

Introduction

The most valid objective of assessing young children with special needs can be to plan intervention which improves the quality of their lives. To realize this goal, early interventionists and teachers must go beyond diagnosis and evaluation of the child in isolation and have an ecological perspective (Bagnato & Neisworth, 1991; Benner, 1992; Cook, Tessier, & Klein, 1992). The ecological perspective includes assessment of the complex interactions that young children with disabilities may have with their families, caregivers, and teachers. The need for careful observations of these interactions has been emphasized in current research as a means of providing a more realistic view of children, their families, and significant others in their environments which can lead to meaningful interventions (Barnard & Kelly, 1990; Guralnick, 1990; Peck, 1993). This article will focus on three aspects of ecological early childhood assessment: family interviews, adult-child learning styles, and parent-child interactions.

The Family Interview

The family interview is an assessment technique which can identify strengths, concerns, and needs of the family. This is a

component of the Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) which is mandated by United States Public Law 102-119. The relationship between the interventionist and the family should be one of teamwork and collaboration during the interview. The interviewer should keep the following precautions in mind (Bagnato & Neisworth, 1991):

1. The identification of family needs and strengths is not a mandatory component of the IFSP - it is voluntary. No eligible child can be refused services because of the family's refusal to be assessed.
2. Identification of family resources and needs should be planned individually with each family.
3. Identification of family strengths and concerns should be conducted in a nonintrusive manner.
4. The identification process should be conducted in ways in which family values are respected.
5. Families have the authority to discuss what areas of family life they wish to reveal in the interview. There must be respect for the family's right to share only the information they feel comfortable in confiding.

Information obtained from the interview needs to be used to directly assist the family. The family members have a right to expect that the information they provide will be used to obtain needed services. The early interventionist should explain why

this information is necessary and how it will be used (Bagnato & Neisworth, 1991; Shelton, Jeppson, & Johnson, 1987). This procedure can lessen the amount of intrusive questioning by the interviewer.

The interventionist needs to assure the family that the interview is confidential and about their right not to answer questions they consider intrusive. Judgmental questions such as, "Do you feel you can't make your child behave?" should be avoided. A more nonjudgmental question can be asked such as, "Tell me about Mary's typical behavior at home." The identification of needs and strengths by the family and not by the interventionist is the primary objective of the interview process (Bagnato & Neisworth, 1991; Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, 1988; Stoneman, 1985; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1990).

Interview Techniques

Some useful interviewing techniques include the use of semistructured questions and the sharing of family stories. The use of semistructured questions can help the interventionist identify in advance broad subjects that should be covered. Within this framework, the interview can be individualized for each family (Bailey & Simeonsson, 1988; Darling, 1989). Some examples of this type of question are (Able-Boone, Sandall, Loughry, & Frederick, 1990):

1. What are some activities you enjoy with your child?

2. Where do you go for assistance with tasks that you do for your child?
3. What kind of activities does your family enjoy participating in?
4. In what ways can we assist you?

Sharing a "family story" can be an effective technique of interviewing, which can be least intimidating for family members. Turnbull and Turnbull (1990) advise listening to each family member alone so that he or she can share a family story. Each family member can provide information about the child and how she or he relates to the infant, toddler, or preschooler. In their stories, family members can share their traditions, values, and experiences. An example of this kind of story could be a description, from the perspective of the family member, of a holiday celebration in which the child participated. Family stories may assist the professional to better understand how families see themselves and their children and what experiences they perceive are significant life events.

Atkinson (1992) suggests the following procedures to obtain family stories: With a family's signed consent, a tape recorder should be used to record the story. The sharing of photographs and videos can assist the family in remembering events. An appropriate setting should be used to assist each family member to feel at ease. The objective for obtaining the family story

can be explained as one in which the interviewer can better understand the child and the family's perspective. Encourage the participants to tell their stories using open-ended questions to assist the storytelling. Look for connections between experiences, such as determining the significant events in the growth and development of the child. Questions that concern the development of the child and her or his role in the family, social relationships in the family, traditions and customs, and future hopes and goals can be prepared in advance. When family members finish their stories, they should be thanked and reassured as to the privacy of their information.

Interviewing Skills for the Early Interventionist

Interviewing skills such as effective listening are critical to the success of the interview method in family assessment. To be an effective listener, the interviewer must convey a nonjudgmental attitude toward the family (Bailey & Simeonsson, 1988). The interviewer must want to hear what participants say and be sincerely interested in understanding their goals and concerns. By being noncritical and accepting, there is a greater chance of finding out information that can be used by the interventionist to assist the family in problem solving and in accessing resources.

The interventionist can demonstrate effective listening skills through the use of appropriate eye contact (natural),

posture (attentive), and voice quality (pleasant) (Evans, Hearn, Uhlemann, & Ivey, 1984). The use of minimal encouragements can add to listening skills. These include head nodding, expectant facial expressions, and the use of silence to encourage the sharing of more information (Winton & Bailey, 1988). To convey to the family that the interviewer has listened to them, another skill is to mirror the content of what the family members have communicated. This can be accomplished through paraphrasing the main points in the message. This skill gives each family member a chance to correct inaccurate perceptions made by the interviewer. It also conveys to the family that the interviewer has listened to each member and builds trust and rapport.

Appropriate attitudes for the interviewer include: respect for the family, a focus on family strengths and goals, and sensitivity to cultural diversity (Stoneman, 1985). Finally, the role of the interviewer is to support the family as being the ultimate decision makers for their children. The interviewer does not make the final decisions about goals for the family and the children. These decisions are to be made by the family members. In conclusion, through skillfully conducting a family interview, the interviewer can blend empathy and acceptance of the family's perspective. The objective is then to assist the family to determine important goals for themselves and their children.

Adult-Child Learning Styles

The second type of assessment discussed in this article is the evaluation of adult-child learning styles. Researchers have found that children as young as six months old have a preference for the way they learn best. For example, in an experiment at Concordia University, River Forest, Illinois (Morgenthaler, 1988), children were given the choice of toys that were brightly colored (visual toys), toys that made a sound or noise (auditory toys) and toys that you pushed, pulled, moved, etc. (kinesthetic toys). When a mother who was visual showed her child the visual toys, the child paid no attention. But when she rang the bell, he moved closer to her, looked at her, reached for the bell and rang the bell. This child showed a strong preference for learning through auditory sensory modes. Another child was being tested with the Denver II Developmental Screening Test (Frankenburg, & Dodds, 1990). She would not dump out the raisin from the bottle. She just wanted to shake it so that she could listen to it. This child, too, showed an auditory preference. Other children were more interested in visual or in kinesthetic toys. It is important for teachers and parents to assess learning styles as they affect children's learning and performance even at a very young age. An example of a learning style checklist that can help teachers and parents observe the learning preferences of toddlers through the primary grades is

the Quick Check of Children's Learning Styles (Bradway, 1987).

School age children are also affected by learning style. In school, children who do well and get good grades are usually visual or auditory, as most instruction is auditory or visual. The children who are kinesthetic, who learn by moving, touching, jumping, etc. usually have more trouble in school. This is not because they are not smart, but because instruction is not in their best learning mode (Carbo, Dunn, & Dunn, 1986). Often the teachers think that the kinesthetic learners are trouble makers and so do their parents. Many people are not aware of the different ways people learn. Therefore, they think that the ways they learn best are the ways everyone learns best.

Bandler and Grinder (1979) developed a theory called Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP). They found that most people tended to have a strong preference for learning and remembering information either visually, auditorially or kinesthetically. A person who had a preference for learning and remembering visually would automatically record the information when they saw it - such as a person's name on a name tag. A person who remembered auditorially would remember the person's name by hearing it once. A visual learner could not imagine learning someone's name by hearing it once. A person who remembered kinesthetically would remember the person's name after he/she wrote it down. He/she would not have to look at the name again to remember it.

Bandler and Grinder also noticed that people tended to use their primary learning style in the speech words they used. For example, a visual learner would say, "I see," "In light of," etc.; an auditory learner would say, "I hear," "It sounds like," etc.; and a kinesthetic learner would say, "I feel," "I can't get a handle on this," etc. Bandler and Grinder found that effective therapists and teachers varied their speech in response to the learner's speech style (visual, auditory, kinesthetic), while therapists and teachers who were not as effective would continue using their own speech style which would create a mismatch and lack of rapport.

Characteristics of Learners and Teachers

Carbo, Dunn and Dunn (1986) found that the students who did least well in school were kinesthetic. Marshall (1990) found that although only between 30 and 40% of the general population are visual learners, 85-90% of the teachers were visual. In addition, 90% of the teachers' secondary preference was auditory. Often, successful learners in school become teachers. Since teachers tend to teach the way they learned best, they taught in a visual or auditory style. Thus, the kinesthetic learners had a much harder time and often concluded that they could not learn and just gave up. This problem could be compounded by parents who were auditory or visual learners trying to teach their kinesthetic children with visual or auditory learning methods.

Teaching Techniques

As teachers and parents begin to broaden their teaching and interactions to include other learning styles, all children, including those with special needs, become more flexible, more creative and more intelligent. McCarthey (1990) developed the 4-Mat teaching technique which makes sure that all lessons include parts for right brain and left brain learners. Carbo (1987) lists a variety of activities to teach reading skills for visual, kinesthetic and auditory learners. Some examples of activities that teachers or parents could do to teach a kinesthetic child the abc's would be to tape an a on the floor and have the child walk around it, or to make cookies and put frosting on the cookie in the shape of an a, or trace an a on sandpaper. Activities for a visual learner to learn the abc's would be by watching Sesame Street, from card games such as BINGO etc., while activities for an auditory learner could be to sing the ABC song or listen to recorded books. In terms of reading methods, the auditory learner would learn best with phonics, while the visual and kinesthetic learners would do better with whole language.

Other Factors Affecting Learning

According to Dunn, Dunn, and Price, other variables that affect learning styles are times of the day or night that people learn best, whether they learn better in bright light or dim light, whether they study better when it is quiet or with the

radio/tv on, or whether they study better in a formal setting (library) or on their bed, whether they learn better studying with a friend or alone, whether they study better in a warm or cool room, or whether they study better when they can eat or drink. Usually parents and teachers think that the way they learn best is the way everyone learns best (such as quiet at the library and not with the radio on).

Some of these factors can be varied in the classroom by having part of the room dim and part bright, having a section of the room that has pillows and bean bag chairs, having a part of the day when children can eat and study, having some activities for cooperative learning, having recorded books with ear phones for auditory learners, having the classroom set up so that some children can move, having learning centers where children can experiment actively individually or in groups, etc. Both students and teachers can find creative ways to solve the problem of different learning styles once they are aware that different styles are the problem, not the inability to learn.

Finally, the way we remember what we have learned is also affected by our learning styles. When you are lost and go in to ask directions, if you are an auditory learner, you will automatically remember what the person said. If you are visual, you will have to write it down and look at the directions, or see the way to go on a map. If you are kinesthetic, you will have to

write it down, or turn your body toward the right and/or the left as you say the directions.

Other Uses of Information About Learning Styles

Besides using learning style information with children in the classroom, teachers can become more effective communicators with parents, with other teachers, with the principal, with volunteers, and with other team members such as the psychologist, the physical therapist, the occupational therapist, the speech therapist, etc. by using the idea of learning styles. If the teacher needs to inform a team member or parent who is auditory, she will be more effective by telling him/her in person or on the phone. If she wants a visual team member to remember something, she needs to send a flyer or note. If she wants a kinesthetic team member to remember something, she should ask them to write the information down. Being aware of differences and assessing adults' and children's preferred learning styles will make teaching, learning, and interacting more enjoyable for everyone.

Parent-Child Interactions

The last type of assessment is the evaluation of parent-child interactions with the objective of increasing the amount of positive interchanges. A parent training program used at Tuesday's Child, a preschool in Chicago, Illinois (U.S.A.) will exemplify this process. Tuesday's Child has been in existence

for ten years and serves approximately 500 family members each year. The parent training portion of the program lasts approximately three to four months. The primary goal is to show parents, in a quantifiable manner, how their interactions and role modeling can determine their child's attitude in approaching home, school, and the outside world.

This goal is met by accomplishing the following objectives for each family:

1. Increase the amount of positive interactions between the parent and child.
2. Reduce the parent's use of spanking, shouting and hitting as methods of discipline.
3. Improve the parent's ability to constructively solve child rearing problems like disobedience, fighting between siblings, temper tantrums or misbehaving in public.
4. Teach parents appropriate ages and stages of child development in the cognitive, emotional, academic, and social areas.

Each family participates in an intensive learning experience adapted to their particular needs. When the program is completed, parents benefit by: a) showing a clearer understanding of child development and how their interactions effect it; b) developing the confidence and skills needed to become their child's advocate; and c) improving the parent/child

relationship, which builds self-esteem.

The program begins with an intake interview done by the intake counselor. Here, parents discuss family life, their child's development, and the basic concerns that brought them to Tuesday's Child. The intake interview form is fairly standard and the total intake process lasts approximately 1-1/2 hours.

Once the parent begins the program, they are assigned to a "graduate" parent instructor who will personally guide the new participant through each aspect of the parenting program. The graduate instructor is closely supervised by a psychologist and other professional staff and gives weekly reports concerning the progress of his/her charges.

All new families fill out a "strength/needs" form. This checklist provides objective information on how well or poorly a child does with various behaviors. The checklist begins with waking in the morning and goes through daily activities such as meal time, compliance, social interactions, bed time and most other behaviors that come up in a regular day.

Once the strength/needs form has been filled out, the behaviors that are "strengths" are put in one column and the behaviors that are "needs" are put in a second column. The "needs" column is then rated, by the family, on a scale (starting with "1") beginning with behaviors the family wants to change the most and ending with behaviors that are less pressing. Examples

of behaviors most often picked to begin working on are: bed time, compliance, and meal time. Strength/Needs are reviewed twice during the training process to check the progress of "need" behaviors.

Throughout the next several weeks, families work with their instructors to learn positive and practical strategies to change behaviors in both the child and the parent. Parents are asked to observe and track their own behaviors toward their children as well as the child's behavior. Data collection plays a big part in the success of this program. Generally, three different behavioral goal plans are worked on by the family. With each plan, baseline data is collected on the specific behavior. This data is then reviewed and strategies for changing the behavior are outlined and written up. Further data is then collected on the implementation of the strategy.

During the parent training portion of the program, parents conduct play sessions with their child. These 20 minute sessions are carefully observed and objectively rated by the family's instructor. These sessions are used to both teach and subsequently practice behavior management skills. These play sessions are very important because they emphasize the importance of positive adult-child interactions.

During the session, the parent requests that the child play with a certain toy for a specific amount of time. During this

interaction, parent instructors give input to the parent. Parents are shown how to give commands and make daily interchanges with their child more pleasant by providing feedback about good behavior. They are also shown how to calmly manage unruly behavior by using a "time out" and a redirection procedure. Praise, verbal following (describing the action) and differential attention (withdrawal of attention) are also taught. The parent practices the newly learned skills in the session. Instructors use these sessions to objectively observe the parent's acquisition of the positive behavior management skills.

Parents also participate in a weekly support group with peers. This group is led by a clinical psychologist and is used to reinforce the parent's understanding of the training techniques as well as to discuss parenting issues. Here, parents can share everyday difficulties in child-rearing and receive support from other participants.

Finally, all families meet with the program director on a monthly basis to discuss their progress and the progress of their child. During this meeting, parents receive an objective report on how their child is doing in the classroom. During this meeting, any additional concerns regarding the child or family is discussed.

In summary, the primary objective of Tuesday's Child's program is to teach parents how, as the primary educators of

their children, their interactions and role modeling can determine their children's attitudes and behavior in approaching other people, school, and the larger social community.

Conclusion

In summary, this article has discussed three types of early childhood special education assessment: family interviews, adult-child learning styles, and parent-child interactions. Hopefully, information from these ecological assessments will lead to meaningful interventions which will improve the functioning of families, children with special needs, and their teachers.

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